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MY SACRED SPACE

Maho Morishita

Nota bene - Maho Morishita is an MA student from Japan. The following is her personal reflection on a particular sacred space, the Horyuji Temple, demonstrating how this Buddhist site can be recognized as sacred to those who encounter it, including Christians such as the author.

Everyone has his or her own sacred space. Sometimes it is in the beauty of nature, and sometimes it is in the hustle and bustle of the big city. Sometimes it belongs to a religious place, and sometimes it belongs to a secular place. For me, it is in a small town in Japan, and it belongs to the Buddhist tradition. Its sacredness is created by three factors, namely the beauty of the architecture, history and education, and its changing atmosphere by time.

I was born in Nara, Japan in 1988. Nara was the capital of Japan about 1300 years ago,¹ and because of that, the city has many ancient Buddhist temples and Shinto shrines. It is not too much to say this city shaped my sense of holiness, especially my vision of a sacred space: Horyuji Temple. This temple is in my hometown, so I went to school passing through its temple yard. Horyuji Temple

is a Buddhist temple built between 601 and 607 AD,² and it is registered as a World Heritage Site because it is the oldest wooden building in the world.³ When visitors pass the temple gate, they can see its cloister in the end of the approach. To enter the cloister, all people have to wash their hands and mouths at the fountain, the same as the Shinto custom. The cloister has a square shape, and inside of it, can be seen a pagoda, main hall, and auditorium. The pagoda is a tower which was originally built to keep the ashes of Buddha, the main hall is a space to pray to Buddhist statues, and the auditorium is a space to learn about Buddhism. All three of spaces contain many pieces of sacred art. The beauty of the architecture and wonder of art bring me a sense of sacredness.

In addition to the beauty of this sacred space, whenever I passed through the temple yard, I felt the weight of the history. Horyuji Temple has been there since 1300 years ago as the center of Japanese Buddhist tradition. In that place, I imagined lots of monks over the centuries who have longed to visit, pray here, and learn here. I also remembered the stories of holy Buddhist monks who worked hard spreading the teaching of Buddhism with great respect because Japanese children usually learn about them in the history class. So I can say that one of the factors which makes this space sacred is the weight of tradition.

Moreover, it is a surprising fact that Horyuji Temple has a totally different atmosphere depending on the time of day. To begin with, it looks most sacred in the early morning. At this time, there are few people who walk around the temple yard. Most of them are monks or employees who clean up the temple. It's quiet and clean. Then, from around 10 a.m., the temple yard is filled by tourists, for it is one of the most popular sightseeing places in Japan. Even in the United States, I have met many people who have visited Horyuji Temple. Many of the nearby gift shops and restaurants are opened, and hundreds of pictures are taken. In this time, the temple looks most

secure. Around 4 p.m., with the beginning of twilight, the “cross-road” time comes. My mother and grandmother told me not to go to temples or shrines at that time. In Japan, some people believe that the time of twilight is the time of “crossroad” of two worlds, namely this, the living world, and the world of the dead. They think the dead can come to this world through temples and shrines. Because of that, they also think if they go to temples/shrines at the “cross-road” time, they might be taken to a different world and never come back. In this time, the temple looks most frightening and transcendent. At 5 p.m., the gate of the temple is closed. Only monks can be inside. However, this gate is opened in the evening only once a year, namely on the feast of Saint Shotoku-Taishi, the founder of Horyuji Temple. On that day, the gate is opened until midnight for the feast ritual and festival. This unusual opening hour also reminds me of the importance of the feast. I would like to say that the use of time is another factor which shapes the sacredness of Horyuji Temple.

Thus there are three factors which make Horyuji Temple a sacred space for me. First, the beauty of the architecture and the art makes it sacred. It has a cloister, and to enter there, I have to wash myself literally. In addition, inside of the cloister I can see many works of sacred art which express the holiness of Buddhism. Second, history and education makes this space sacred. I can recognize this temple as sacred because I know it’s been there starting from 1300 years ago. Also my educational background reminds me of the stories of hard working, holy monks who were involved with Horyuji Temple. Lastly, time has an important role to make the space holy, secure, frightful, and transcendent. In sum, my sacred space is Horyuji Temple, which is the Buddhist temple in Nara, Japan. It is sacred for me because of three factors: the architecture, the tradition, and its changing atmosphere.

Notes:

1 Collcutt, Martin, Marius B. Jansen, and Isao. Kumakura. 1988. *Cultural Atlas of Japan*. New York: Facts on File. 62.

2 Horyuji Temple was built originally between 601 and 607 AD, destroyed by fire in 670 and immediately rebuilt. See Collcutt, Jensen and Kumakura, 56.

3 “Buddhist Monuments in the Horyu-ji Area, UNESCO World Heritage.” Accessed 2016-2-11.